

RISING TIDE OF RACISM AGAINST TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

PAUL DONOVAN looks at the continuing racism being directed toward the travelling community and some hopeful signs that things maybe about to change for the better

RACISM AGAINST Irish Travellers and Gypsies seems to be on the increase if events of the past few weeks are much to go by.

At Firle in east Sussex, an effigy of a caravan with pictures of Travellers on the outside was pushed into a fire as part of local celebrations. There had been problems between local people and Travellers camped in the vicinity over the preceding months. At nearby Lewes the local people burn an effigy of the Pope every year.

"There seems to be a wider issue there of anti-Catholicism, all happening under the watchful eye of the east Sussex constabulary, so it would be interesting to know their view on race crime," said Father Joe Brown of the Catholic Church's Traveller Chaplaincy. "There need to be steps taken to ensure that this year will never be repeated."

The Irish deaths in custody group CEART has likened the burning of the effigies in Firle to "the cross burning carried out by the KKK in American states during the Black peoples fight for civil rights during the 1960's."

Some 14 people have now been arrested by Sussex Police in connection with the actions at Firle.

Then hard on the heels of the blatant racism of Firle came a report from the National Farmers Union declaring Travellers to be "rural outlaws" who cost farmers £100 million. The report claimed that some farmers spend more than £1500 on clean up costs. More than 20 per cent of the 2,000 farmers questioned in the survey claimed to have been victims of physical threats while over half had equipment stolen.

The NFU in reality seem to have cobbled together some rather spurious facts to present themselves as the victims. "We haven't seen any evidence to back up the figures. They refer to illegal and legal Travellers but to us there is no such thing as an illegal Traveller," said Fr Brown. "These comments are not helpful, especially made in such an inflammatory way. They should engage with the relevant people before making such accusations."

Terry Stewart, the co-ordinator of CEART, believes the attitudes betrayed in the NFU report dovetail with the actions taken at Firle. The attitude of the farmers portrayed in the report lead to actions like those at Firle. Stewart though does not believe that the NFU report is in anyway representative of rural attitudes generally.

Talk to some of the Travelling community and another story comes out altogether. They feel under attack with whole rural communities often turning against them, while the police stand by - slow to react to such abuse. It is notable that it took more than two weeks for Sussex Police to make arrests relating to the Firle incident. The question of course is had the story not been featured in the media would the Sussex Police have acted at all?

The ultimate outcome of what happens when racist attitudes like those displayed in Firle and elsewhere go unchecked was soon when in June the 15



John Delaney

Andrew Ryder, the chairman of the Traveller Law Reform Coalition, has been trying to promote reconciliation between the local settled population and people in Firle. "We've been looking for common ground, meeting Travellers and arranging meetings with the local MP Norman Baker," said Ryder.

Ryder has little time for the NFU report which he describes as "irresponsible." He believes that such an ill-considered report simply undermines the credibility of the NFU.

Yvonne McNamara of the Brent Irish Advisory Service Travellers Project, believes recent events show how bad things have got for the Traveller community. "The Travellers are incredibly victimised. If there had been the effigies of four black people put into the fire at Firle there would rightly have been national headlines. Travellers are second class citizens so receive this treatment," said McNamara.

She believes that the politicians and police have to take responsibility for the situation and address it in a bold manner.

Labour MP Kevin McNamara, who is chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Travellers Law Reform (APPGTLR) believes attacks like those at Firle and from the NFU show "the raw nerve of racist Britain."

"These incidents underline what I and my Parliamentary colleagues in the APPGTLR have been pressing for, namely a recognition of the challenges facing Travellers and the suffering caused by the misunderstandings of some as to their way of life," said McNamara.

McNamara believes that it is the problems of accommodation and ongoing discrimination that need to be given priority by government.

Under the Caravans Sites Act 1968 local authorities had to make sites and facilities available for Traveller communities to access. This right was reversed with the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Even before the CJPOA though many local authorities did not comply with the law regarding the provision of sites. The result of the CJPOA has been that Travellers finish up in a state of perpetual motion being constantly moved on by one

will deliberately fail to collect refuse from Traveller sites, allowing it to build up thereby ensuring that the Traveller community conform to the popular stereotype that Travellers are dirty and unhealthy. Pressure then builds from the settled population to move them on.

A recent government initiative has enabled Traveller groups to buy their own sites under privatisation of site provision but again the underlying racial prejudice is evident with 90 per cent of planning permission applications being rejected. For the settled population there is usually an 80 per cent approval rate for planning permission applications.

Travellers also have problems getting on GP's waiting lists.

"Every piece of government legislation for Travellers comes in the form of criminal law. There are anti-social families on every housing estate but the estate is not closed down for that reason. Yet that is what happens when there is one disruptive Traveller family in a community," said Fr Brown.

There are now moves to get the duty on local authorities to provide sites restored. The Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recently recommended the reintroduction of "a statutory duty on local authorities to 'make' or 'facilitate' the provision of sites for Gypsies and Travellers." Research done for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister found there needed to be 2,000 new sites set up over the next five years to meet demand.

The Traveller Law Reform Coalition together with the Commission for Racial Equality and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) have come together to campaign for amendments to the upcoming Housing Bill in order to gain recognition for Travellers. At present the draft Housing Bill contains no mention of the needs for Traveller's sites. Julie Morgan, Labour MP for Cardiff North and the vice chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Travellers Law Reform, will seek to get amendments to the Housing Bill passed. "We think the issue of accommodation is at the heart of much of the prejudice and exclusion, from which Travellers suffer, if that can be addressed their equality status can be improved," said Heaven Crawley, associate director of the IPPR.

Many of the amendments sought are likely to come from the Travellers Law Reform Bill (TLRB) which was introduced in June by David Atkinson, the Conservative MP for Bournemouth. The bill fell but it is hope to implement many of its provisions through a variety of legislation beginning with the Housing Bill.

So there is a growing awareness of the plight of Travellers in the wider community. Even the NFU report recognized the need for sites to be provided. Important recent developments such as the coalition coming together to lobby on the Housing Bill and the Parliamentary lobby groups show not only a growing awareness of the plight of Travellers but also of the community itself beginning to find its authentic voice.